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Under a crooked spire

In a town where the community's expectations have been as flat as their vowel sounds Mick Owen found a ray of hope being nurtured by the local football club and some of its oldest supporters.

Chesterfield is an unlovely town. Despite its medieval origins and its famously twisted church spire, North Derbyshire's urban centre is no tourist trap. Coach loads of trippers rush through from the M1 to the Peak District as quickly as town planners can contrive it. Bypassed and unloved, the coal field of which Chesterfield is the centre did have a brief moment in the sun, or at least in the news, when Margaret Thatcher waged class war on an entire industry but her inevitable victory brought economic devastation and a depression which has barely lifted since.

These days there are patches of growth discernible around the town. Some regeneration projects have succeeded and the reopened canal is the focus of an ambitious development to the east of the A61 towards Sheffield set to mix housing, shops and open space. Just across the dual carriageway, amid the usual car-friendly superstores, is the new home of Chesterfield Football Club, another example of a regeneration project but one without words like "place-making approach", "best practice regeneration" and "maintaining neighbourhood coherence" attached to it.

Simply put, the football club sold its Victorian ground and built a concrete bowl on the outskirts of town. Apart from its playing surface, there was little of the old Saltergate ground that was fit for its 21st century purpose and while the loss of heritage may be saddening the opportunities offered by the new venue outweighed the sentiment. Chief among these opportunities is the space that allows the club to work with its community in schemes designed to do more than just build an audience to fill the new, blue seats. A conversation with Rachel Booth of the Chesterfield FC Community Trust revealed a number of initiatives which, despite the first team's somewhat inconvenient relegation, are on the up and up.

Like all sports development professionals Booth has the enthusiasm of youth countered by the shop-soiled realism born of striving to create sustainable solutions in a profession beset by short-term funding and short-sighted politicians. Her news, as we sit sipping local authority coffee in the glass-domed gallery of the Queens Park Leisure Centre, is that funding for the project we are here to discuss has been cut. The Football Foundation's Extra Time project has been discontinued after four years of using "the power of football to target older people aged 55 plus". This despite survey responses which showed that 21% of participants used health services less, 50% said they felt healthier and 70% reckoned they found everyday tasks easier than before getting involved.

Chesterfield were one of the last clubs to get involved so after less than 12 months of tea dances, chair-based exercise and a heritage project linked to the old ground Booth and her colleagues are faced with finding replacement funding. Curiously, the long-term future of the initiatives seem secure with the trust set to take over the management of what will be dubbed the Midlands Co-operative Community Stand on a 99-year lease, while what happens in the autumn is far less clear; except, that is, for one element of the initiative which has already moved on to being self-managed and sustainable, a state described by Booth as "the Holy Grail of sports development".

ExSpires is made up of about a dozen men in their sixties and seventies who, injury, illness and other calls on their time permitting, meet every Tuesday on the 3G court in a quiet corner of Queens Park from 11am to noon to play what started as "walking football". These days, as the activity has strengthened joints, improved cardiovascular capacity and caused the pounds to drop off, the game is no longer conducted strictly at a walk but by half-time there is very little

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running indeed. However, the players still look spry and the banter is still operating at full bore. After the game the players repair to the public house over the road where the landlord allows them to park free of charge. It is clear that with time and some thought to recruitment a club will develop with officers, a constitution and doubtless an application to Awards for All. Plans already include a fixture against visiting League 2 opponents, Rotherham, next season, a Christmas dinner and, if Booth has her way, regular fixtures against similar teams from neighbouring Bolsover and Staveley.

Conversation with the ExSpire is illuminating and inspirational. Their plans, their history, their personal stories all come tumbling out and even as the game recommences one or other pops over to tell us of losing two stones and amazing health professionals by eradicating diabetes indicators from his blood, how the surface is kind to someone with a new hip or how their plans for the Rotherham fixture involve lunch before going to the game. All are Spireites, which is to say supporters of Chesterfield FC, and all sport replica kit. The sense of a Russian doll of communities is tangible. Outside the fence a van sits to take the two Chesterfield apprentices who have been making up the numbers back to base. Booth is clearly a valued partner but the drive and ambition is all coming from the 73-year-old goalkeeper Chris and his pals.

Colleagues from the football industry are reassuring on the subject of community trusts attached to big name football clubs and seek to offer a sense that half-baked schools coaching programmes and Easter holiday play schemes which benefit only the club's bank balance are things of the past. If Chesterfield's is an example and the energetic and knowledgeable Booth is typical then that confidence is well founded and we can look forward to the FA starting a "70+ and All to Play For" scheme before they part company with their latest first team manager.

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